Jane Austen as Professional Writer

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I

In the present century, Jane Austen's critical reputation has never stood higher. Her popularity both inside and outside the academy has been firmly consolidated and "debates rage about whether we should read with and within as well as against the grain and allow the novels to estrange as well as confirm our own views" throughout the English-speaking and English-learning world (Todd 2006: 35). Her image has changed drastically from the late nineteenth-century's modest, ladylike Christian spinster to the early twentieth-century's skilful novelist famous for her irony and technical innovation worthy of study in newly established university departments of literature. Then the image of a woman defiantly struggling against patriarchy appeared in the feminist criticism of the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the one of a politically conservative writer with her works as a fictional embodiment of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The late twentieth century saw the emergence of the Marxist and postcolonial criticism, which have been countered, in turn, by critical trends that try to rescue her from such overtly ideological perspectives. Indeed, it would be nearly impossible to say anything about Austen without a basic knowledge of the above reception history.

In this essay, I shall investigate why and how Austen's amateurish, ladylike image was originally created by her devotees in the late nineteenth century, and contrast it with her persona as a professional writer which emerged during her residence at Chawton. By closely looking at her letters, especially those written after the publication of her first work, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), I would like

to re-examine her equivocal setting as a professional writer yet dependent daughter/sister within her small family circle, hoping to satisfy her craving for independence by writing.

II

In a series of lectures on English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo from 1896 to 1903, Lafcadio Hearn introduced three particular writers as representative of nineteenth-century British female novelists[1]: Jane Austen of England, Maria Edgeworth of Ireland, and Susan Ferrier of Scotland. Of these three, he gave unstinting praise to Austen in contrast to the other two. While the only fact about Edgeworth "which is more important in English literature than all her own productions put together, is that she first inspired Sir Walter Scott to write his wonderful Waverley novels," and Ferrier's work "is very Scotch" and "not much read to-day except by men of letters," Hearn asserted that "[t] *here* is no English novelist greater than Miss Austen" (530–32). After talking about her literary achievement to his Japanese students, he added a slightly intriguing remark:

> [Austen's works] were too fine. Indeed, even to-day, it requires good literary training to appreciate the extraordinary merits of her books. No common vulgar person could understand at all, that is, at all below the surface. . . . I am not sure whether you could like Austen or not. (533)

It is significant that Hearn, himself not a genuine Englishman, is being exclusive in his praise for Austen as a piece of English cultural heritage, dismissing "common vulgar" readers. It may signify the reverse side of his unconscious inferiority. His sense of reverence and pride in having the privileged Austen as a literary treasure is reminiscent of that of "Janeites," the Austen devotees.

According to the *OED*, the word "Janeite" entered the English language in 1896, precisely when Hearn started teaching in Tokyo.[2] Claudia L. Johnson claims that the Janeitism of the early twentieth century was principally a male

enthusiasm shared among an elite corps of publishers, professors, and literati, such as Montague Summers, A. C. Bradley, Lord David Cecil, Sir Walter Raleigh, R. W. Chapman, and E. M. Forster. She further explains their "ecstasy of the elect":

> [Austen] was not merely their *dear* Jane, but their *divine* Jane, their *matchless* Jane, and they were her *cult*, her *sect*, her *little company* (*fit though few*), her *tribe* of adorers who celebrate the *miracle* of her work in flamboyantly hyperbolic terms. (30, original emphasis)

These enthusiasts were precisely the target for D. W. Harding, a psychologist rather than a literary critic, attacked in his influential essay in 1940. Detecting "regulated hatred" beneath the cosy domesticity of Austen's novels, he declared that her works were "read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked" (6). The people Harding refers to are clearly Janeites, described with glacial disdain as the "exponents of urbanity," the "sensitive," and the "cultured," the "Gentlemen of an older generation of mine" who distribute what Johnson calls "Austeniana" (34) through "histories of literature, university courses, literary journalism and polite allusion" (Harding 5).

The most significant cause of the emergence of these devotees was the publication of her nephew's hagiographical memoir in 1871, which consolidated the image of the somewhat inviolable "dear Aunt Jane." He portrays Austen as a harmless, homely figure, who eschews fame and professional status, and who writes only in the intervals permitted from the more important domestic duties of a devoted daughter, sister, and aunt:

> She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to hav-

> ing this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was coming. (81–82)
>
> Her life had been passed in the performance of home duties, and the cultivation of domestic affections, without any self-seeking or craving after applause. (130)

It was not only her nephew who depicted Austen as a paragon of domesticity. Her brother, Henry Austen's account of his sister in his "Biographical Notice of the Author," published in the first edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (1818), also presents a very different image from that suggested by Austen's own letters:

> She became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives. Most of her works . . . were composed many years previous to their publication. It was with extreme difficulty that her friends, whose partiality she suspected whilst she honoured their judgement, could prevail on her to publish her first work. Nay, so persuaded was she that its sale would not repay the expense of publication, that she actually made a reserve from her very moderate income to meet the expected loss. . . . Most gratifying to her was the applause . . . so much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen. In the bosom of her own family she talked of them freely, thankful for praise, open to remark, and submissive to criticism. But in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. (*Northanger Abbey* 6)

His effort to promote an image of a ladylike, unprofessional, modest, private, and domestic writer, as well as his nephew's memoir, had an incalculable influence on the popularisation and critical reading of Austen's novels.

Their representations of Austen as a proper, amateur lady writer rather than a professional woman writer were closely associated with the issue of feminine propriety in the eighteenth century: writing for publication was generally regarded as jeopardising modesty, which was the critical keystone of femininity. There was also the persistent prejudice against learned ladies. Elizabeth Montagu, the queen of the Bluestocking circle, commented that "[i] t is the misfortune of women who are reputed to be learned to have the fools of both sexes, and the witlings of both sexes for their enemies, and they must be upon their guard against ridicule" (Guest 100). Hester Thrale suspected that most men would "prefer the Delicacy of the Queen of Love to all the Intelligence of Minerva" (Poovey 39).

Mary Poovey argues that the tradition of late eighteenth-century women writers developed from two groups that had emerged earlier in the century: respectable women who wrote primarily for their own or their friends' amusement, and "the faintly or frankly disreputable women" who published for profit (36). The latter group included Susannah Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Delavier Manley, and Aphra Behn, the last being introduced by Hearn as "a very licentious writer" to his Japanese students (529). The leading figure in the first category was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who, entertaining her aristocratic position, was also haunted by the need both to express herself in writing and for public recognition. She resolved this dilemma in two ways: by allowing her unpublished texts to be circulated privately among her social peers, and by publishing her political or critical work anonymously. "Respectable" women writers followed her rule, especially that of anonymous publication. Among them were Sarah Fielding, Frances Burney, and Ann Radcliffe: they affixed their names to their works only when their excellent reputations as novelists had already been established. Austen, however, published all her six complete novels anonymously.

It is evident that Austen's prime motive for publishing was not to support herself or her family financially, unlike her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, who started her writing career as a freelance reviewer in London, or Charlotte

Smith, who began to publish her novels in order to support herself and her children after her inept husband was imprisoned for debt. Yet, Austen's desire for seeing her own writing in print was strong from her girlhood: she collected her juvenilia "in volumes made to resemble published books as closely as possible" (Fergus 13). When she completed *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), her father tried to help her publish it, in vain. Nevertheless, her desire to write and to be published continued. By the age of twenty-five, Austen had already had three substantial and original books completed, namely, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey*, in their future published titles.

However, she had to wait another ten years to actually publish her own books. During this period, she reluctantly moved to Bath in 1801, had her supposed romance in the West Country around 1801–1804, refused a marriage proposal in 1802, experienced her father's death in 1805 and her family's move to Southampton in 1807. Indeed, this period was the most eventful in her comparatively uneventful life, which deprived her of the time to fulfil her creativity in writing. It was only after she settled in Chawton Cottage in 1809, her "*second*, as well as the *last* home," as her nephew writes, that she found her productivity restored, for during the temporary residences at Bath and Southampton, she was "only a sojourner in a strange land, but here she found a real home amongst her own people" (67). They consisted of her old, widowed mother, her unmarried sister Cassandra, and Martha Lloyd, the unmarried sister of her brother's second wife. Chawton Cottage was indeed a home for four single women, dependent on their family and relatives.

When moving into this quiet cottage, Austen was thirty-three. Her nephew's description indicates that both Jane and Cassandra had almost certainly abandoned their marriage prospects and resolved to live as spinsters:

> At the time of which I am now writing, [Austen] never was seen, either morning or evening, without a cap; I believe that she and her sister were generally thought to have taken to the garb of middle age earlier than their

> years or their looks required; and that, though remarkably neat in their dress as in all their ways, they were scarcely sufficiently regardful of the fashionable, or the becoming. (70)

It is evident that Austen was increasingly aware of the implications of her position as a single, dependent female. As a woman of her time, she could be said to be a failure: she was poor, unmarried and "could look forward, apparently, to nothing but decline and fall" (Hodge 111). Nevertheless, these unpromising circumstances unleashed her creativity. It was as though "she were restored to herself, to her imagination, to all her powers" (Tomalin 211). Indeed, it was her life at Chawton that gave birth to Austen's distinctive persona: she revised her earlier three works and published the first two, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which brought her a strong sense of professionalism:

> You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S [ense] and S [ensibility] is sold & that it has brought me £140—besides the Copyright, if that sh[d] ever be of any value. —I have now therefore written myself into £250. — which only makes me long for more. (*Letters* 217)

That Austen did have a sense of her role as a professional writer, recognising the existence of an audience beyond her family circle, becomes an important factor in understanding her later novels. Her own personal experience surely showed her the perils of the female situation in contemporary patriarchal society. Although successful as a published writer, Austen, in her lifetime, never achieved the popularity that novelists like Edgeworth enjoyed, nor were her earnings from her novels large. Austen's four published novels during her lifetime earned her less than £700: this was at a time when Edgeworth could "command between £1,500 and £2,000 per novel" (Poovey 211). Austen might have realised her dream of publishing her own books and gained a seeming independence, yet her situation as a spinster with three other single dependent women continued to cast a shade over her life. Her position was highly equivocal: as a

published writer, she was an independent woman. Yet, in reality, she was still very much a dependent, who could never escape familial duty.

III

> It had been a busy week, & I wanted a few days quiet, & exemption from the Thought & contrivances which any sort of company gives. —I often wonder how *you* can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House; —And how good M^rs^ West [Jane West] c^d^ have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb. (321, original emphasis)

By the time she wrote this letter to Cassandra, Austen, aged forty, was undoubtedly an established writer: she had published four novels, the last one, *Emma* (1815), being dedicated to the Prince Regent, even if reluctantly; and had completed *Persuasion* just one month before. Although devoid of her own room for composition at Chawton, she was at least privileged with a general exemption from domestic chores, free from thinking about "Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb." Her only household responsibility was, by agreement, to prepare the nine o'clock breakfast and to keep the key of the wine cupboard. Since breakfast was "nothing more than tea and toast, both made on the dining-room fire" (Tomalin 214), her domestic routine was undemanding. The rest of the housework was undertaken by Cassandra and Martha Lloyd, now that the old Mrs. Austen had retired from her position of a housewife. Austen, indeed, enjoyed considerable domestic freedom.

To the professional women writers of the eighteenth century, as discussed earlier, the issue of feminine propriety, particularly domesticity, was of the greatest concern. Many of them went on to insist that "their professional status had not been achieved at the expense of their womanliness; they were still

women before they were authors" (Spender 239). Feeling pressure to deny that they were motivated by desire for fortune or fame, these women writers needed to emphasise their homely images. The prolific Jane West "declared that domestic duties always preceded writing" and the learned Elizabeth Carter was admired by Samuel Johnson for the fact that she "could make a pudding as well as translate Epictetus" (Todd 1984: 8). Although successful and even respected for their literary achievements, these early professional women writers still needed to take pains to prove that they had not lost a proper sense of feminine domesticity.

Austen, an unmarried, dependent daughter, thus broadly regarded as a domestic woman, consolidated her persona as a professional writer with a smaller domestic burden than the other inhabitants at Chawton. Her sense of herself as a public figure and respectable writer became gradually evident from her letters after the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*. Four months after this had been followed by *Pride and Prejudice*, she jokingly described her own identity to her sister:

> I should like to see Miss Burdett very well, but that I am rather frightened by hearing that she wishes to be introduced to *me*. If I *am* a wild Beast, I cannot help it. It is not my own fault. (212–13, original emphasis)

The playful words "wild Beast" suggest that the secret of authorship was somehow leaking out. By the autumn of that year, however, she was thinking about exploiting publicity rather than withdrawing from it:

> I was previously aware of what I sh^{d} be laying myself open to—but the truth is that the Secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the Shadow of a secret now—& that I believe whenever the 3^{d} appears, I shall not even attempt to tell Lies about it. —I shall rather try to make all the Money than all the Mystery I can of it. —People shall pay for their Knowledge if I can make them. (231)

By November, Austen was more confident still, making a teasing remark to her sister: "I do not despair of having my picture in the Exhibition at last—all white & red, with my Head on one Side; —or perhaps I may marry young M^{r} D'arblay [Frances Burney's son]" (250). The success of *Pride and Prejudice*, her "own darling Child" (201), surely fuelled her pride in her own creativity and desire for further publications.

Her keen interest in the sales of her own works is also notable from the very beginning of her publishing career, which clashes with the domestic, amateur image created by her brother and nephew as discussed earlier. Her letters demonstrate one aspect of her professionalism in their keen sense of profit. She writes, for example, of her disappointment with the publisher's offer:

> P[ride] & P[rejudice] is sold. —Egerton gives £110 for it. —I would rather have had £150, but we could not both be pleased, & I am not at all surprised that he should not chuse to hazard so much. (197)

On another occasion, she observes her publisher shrewdly:

> The Advertisement is in our paper to day for the first time; —18^{s} —He [Egerton] shall ask £1—1-for my two next, & £1—8-for my stupidest of all. (201)

For Austen, "shall" in the second or third person is always emphatic: it "commands or threatens," to use an eighteenth-century grammarian's formula (Phillips 125). By naming sums in excess of a pound, she "jokingly suggests that she will imitate Egerton's sharp business practices" and implies that she "will not permit him to undercharge again when her own profit is at stake" (Fergus 22–23).

Austen expressed her passion for publishing not only to her own generation, but also to her favourite young niece, Fanny Knight:

> You will be glad to hear that the first Edit: of M[ansfield] P[ark] is all sold. —Your Uncle Henry is rather wanting me to come to Town, to settle about a 2^{d} Edit: —but as I could not very conveniently leave home now, I have written him my Will & pleasure, & unless he still urges it, shall not go. —I am very greedy & want to make the most of it; —but as you are much above caring about money, I shall not plague you with any particulars. (281)

Apparently, Austen herself was much "caring about money," which made her head for the "Town" in less than two weeks. She wrote to Fanny again from there:

> [I]t is not settled yet whether I *do* hazard a 2^{d} Edition [of *Mansfield Park*]. We are to see Egerton today, when it will probably be determined. —People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at; —but tho' I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter* too. (287, original emphasis)

Austen also took a keen, critical interest in contemporary writers and their works. She expresses, for example, concerns for Mary Brunton's latest book: "We have tried to get Self-controul [sic], but in vain. —I *should* like to know what her Estimate is—but am always half afraid of finding a clever novel *too clever*—& of finding my own story & my own people all forestalled" (186, original emphasis). Her affectionate use of "my own" signifies how proud she felt about her own creations. Her sense of professionalism was also aimed at her favourite poet of the time. On hearing about the publication of *Waverley* (1814), she humorously complains:

> Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. —It is not fair. —He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths. (277)

It is worth noting that Scott also published anonymously and continued to deny authorship, and Austen was up to date enough in literary gossip to know who wrote *Waverley*.

Her attitudes as a professional writer are perhaps best exemplified in her letter to the haughty Mr. Clarke, the librarian of the Prince Regent. To his persistent request for her to write what he would wish, Austen answered calmly and realistically:

> You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of Composition which might recommend me at present, & I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem. —I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter. —No—I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way; And though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (312)

When Austen wrote this letter, she had been writing *Persuasion* for nearly eight months, and the phrase "though I may never succeed again" implies a fear that this novel might not be profitable. At this time, "Profit or Popularity" was of even more concern to her as a writer than it had been previously acute. Her family had suffered financial difficulties: Henry's bank had failed on 15 March 1816. Austen herself had lost £13.7s.0*d*. of profit on *Mansfield Park* (1814) that had remained in her account with Henry. Other members of her family were much more seriously affected. Her uncle, James Leigh-Perrot, lost £10,000, whereas her brothers, Edward £20,000 and James and Frank some hundreds, respectively (*A Family Record* 234). As a result, neither Frank nor Henry could

afford any longer to contribute to their mother's income. The four single women at Chawton were thus obliged to curtail their living expenses further, just like the four poor Dashwood women in *Sense and Sensibility*. Four months before her death, Austen warned her favourite niece: "Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony" (332). This is precisely what induces Charlotte Lucas to marry the man whom she despises, and what exempts the wealthy Emma Woodhouse from any desire to marry.

Austen fulfilled her domestic duties as late as January 1817, only six months before her death. The postscript of her letter to her friend indicates that she was still in charge of wine at Chawton:

> The real object of this Letter is to ask you for a Receipt, but I thought it genteel not to let it appear early. We remember some excellent orange Wine at Manydown, made from Seville oranges, entirely or chiefly—& should be very much obliged to you for the receipt, if you can command it within a few weeks. (328)

Although her domestic duty was not a demanding one, Austen never completely escaped her familial obligations during her lifetime. As an unmarried daughter, she "played, supremely well, the part that was expected of her. . . . She nursed the sick, looked after the children, gave way to her brothers' convenience. She was, rightly, a beloved aunt and sister" (Hodge 13). As long as she lived in the parental household, Austen was a dependent woman, even if her career as a published writer gained her some money.

Jane Austen, the youngest daughter, died before her sister and her mother. She remained their beloved daughter and sister until the very end of her life. In failing health, she expressed her love for her family:

> [I]f I live to be an old Woman I must expect to wish I had died now, blessed in the tenderness of such a Family, & before I had survived either

them or their affection. (341)

As a poor spinster, Austen believed that her life would deteriorate if she lived much longer: she could not foretell the eventual "Popularity" which would bring her great "Profit" in coming ages. Although realising her long-sought dream of becoming a published writer, her position was still quite equivocal: she saw herself as a professional writer, yet could not fully enjoy the status that should accompany that position. Unlike writers such as Wollstonecraft, whose primary desire was to gain independence by writing, Austen's initial motive for writing in her early twenties was to fulfil her creative talents. Nevertheless, in her later years, Austen became keenly aware that she was writing in order to achieve her own personal freedom. She may have started her career as a lady-like amateur writer, but ended her short life as an established, professional writer, whose principles were evident in her letter to Mr. Clarke: "I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way."

Notes

[1] Lafcadio Hearn (1850−1904) was the son of an Anglo-Irish surgeon major in the British army and a Greek mother. He arrived in Yokohama in 1890 and moved to Matsue to teach English. Later he married Setsu Koizumi, the daughter of a local samurai family. In 1896 he began teaching English literature at Tokyo Imperial University and later at Waseda University. His books on Japan include *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), *Shadowings* (1900), *A Japanese Miscellany* (1901), *and Kwaidan* (1904).

[2] In 1896, George Saintsbury wrote: "It did not apparently occur to this critic that he (or she) was in the first place paying Miss Austen an extraordinarily high compliment—a compliment almost greater than the most enthusiastic 'Janites' [his original spelling] have ventured." *OED Online*.
〈https://fp.wul.waseda.ac.jp/f5-w-687474703a2f2f7777772e6f65642e636f6d6d$$/view/Entry/100725?redirectedFrom=Janeite#eid〉

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